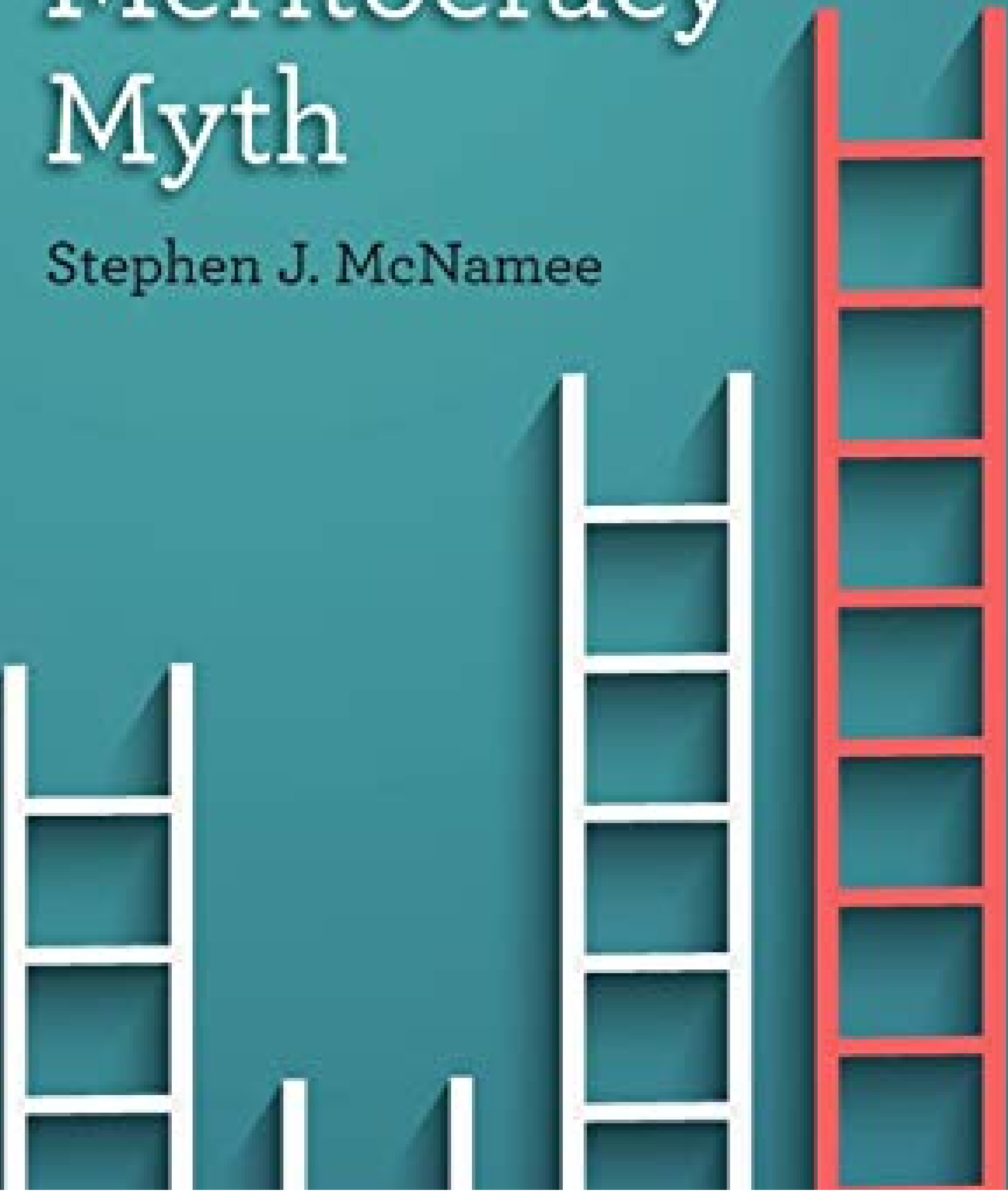
Fourth Edition

# The Meritocracy Myth

Stephen J. McNamee



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*Fourth Edition*

Stephen J. McNamee
*University of North Carolina Wilmington*

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To the memory of
Robert K. Miller, Jr.,
colleague, coauthor, and friend

# Contents

# Preface to the Fourth Edition

In the first edition of this book, published in 2004, my coauthor Robert K. Miller, Jr., and I set out to challenge the commonly held assertion that in America, people get out of the system what they put into it, based exclusively, or primarily, on their individual merit. We did not suggest that individual merit is a myth, or that it has nothing to do with who gets ahead and who falls behind. Instead, we made the case that the presumption that the system as a whole fundamentally operates on the basis of merit in determining who gets what and how much is a myth.

According to the meritocracy myth, America is a land of unlimited opportunity in which individuals can go as far as their individual talents and abilities can take them. We identified the characteristics most frequently identified with individual merit—innate talent or capacity, hard work, having the right attitude, and playing by the rules, or having high moral character and virtue—and examined the empirical evidence of the impact of these factors on prospects for social mobility. We then identified a variety of nonmerit factors, including inheritance, social and cultural capital, differential access to educational opportunities, reduced rates of self-employment, luck, and discrimination that tend to neutralize, suppress, or even negate the effects of individual merit. We concluded that the overall evidence suggests that Americans tend to overestimate the effects of merit factors and underestimate the effects of nonmerit factors in terms of how the system actually operates.

Since the publication of the first edition, nonmerit factors have become even more important. These changes are described and analyzed in the current edition. Economic inequality has increased, along with consolidation of privilege, especially at the top of the system. The gap between the rich and the poor has widened, making it more difficult for those at the bottom of the system to close the gap. Consolidation of power and privilege especially has allowed those at the top of the system to more easily pass on nonmerit economic, social, and cultural advantages to succeeding

generations. The continued decline of self-employment and increasing dominance and power of existing large corporations has further eroded the entrepreneurial pathway to social mobility, creating barriers for entry and making it more difficult for individuals to move up in the system by striking out on their own and creating new enterprises. Globalization, deindustrialization, and de-unionization have compromised opportunities for millions of working-class Americans through no fault of their own. Finally, the increasing capacity of propertied interests to disproportionately influence political outcomes has further consolidated power and privilege at the top of the system. To the extent that propertied interests prevail rather than the interests of the general public, the system gets further tilted, or "rigged," in favor of the already privileged.

## NEW TO THE FOURTH EDITION

In the current edition, data, tables, and figures have been updated and descriptions of new research on these topics have been incorporated. A concerted effort was made to streamline the presentation of evidence throughout. The current edition takes a more explicitly life-cycle approach as an organizing scheme. As in previous editions, the first chapter describes the origins and prospects of the American Dream. Chapter 2 assesses the key factors associated with the formula for success based on individual merit. Subsequent chapters describe various nonmerit barriers to mobility, organized roughly by the stage of the life cycle in which they are typically encountered. Chapter 3 discusses the effects of initial class placement at birth on future life chances. Chapter 4 describes the informal advantages of social and cultural capital, resources typically initially acquired in childhood and extended throughout the life course.

Historically, the primary pathways of upward mobility in America have been through education and entrepreneurial activity. Chapter 5 describes the effects of unequal access to formal educational opportunities, beginning with K–12 and extending through higher education. Following the completion of formal education, the next stage of the life cycle for most Americans is to enter the full-time labor force. Chapter 6 describes the declining prospects for upward mobility through self-employment and the ascent of large-scale corporations. Chapter 7 describes the impact of luck on economic outcomes, especially with regard to the nonmerit effects of what kinds of jobs are available in the labor force that individuals enter into, how much they pay, and how many people are pursuing them—independent of personal characteristics.

After completing formal education and getting established in the labor market, the typical next stage in the life cycle for most people is marriage. Chapter 8 discusses the prospects for social mobility not directly based on one's merit or achievement, but through marriage or partnering. Chapter 9 discusses the nonmerit factor of discrimination in all of its forms as they relate to economic outcomes. Depending on the type involved, discrimination can be encountered throughout the life course, as

in the case of race or sex discrimination, or it may be encountered at later stages in the life course, such as with age discrimination. The concluding chapter summarizes the main points in the book and presents policy options regarding how issues of economic inequality might be addressed. Transition statements at the end of each chapter have been added to assist the reader in placing each chapter in relation to the next.

Chapter 8 (Mobility through Marriage: The Cinderella Effect) is new to this edition. The tendency toward class endogamy, especially within the upper class, was discussed in prior editions, but the increasing importance of the consolidation of privilege through marriage among the affluent and the passing on of nonmerit economic, social, and cultural privilege to children warranted a separate discussion in this new edition. Because men have historically controlled access to power, wealth, and status, this particular form of upward mobility has generally been more available to women. As women have more recently increased their levels of educational attainment and labor-force participation, however, the prospect for men to marry up has also increased. Marrying for money as the primary motivation for marriage is a type of social climbing that is generally not considered socially acceptable, and would not be viewed as a legitimate part of the American Dream. The strong tendency for homogamy and concentration of wealth at the top of the system increases the capacity for "power couples" to pass on nonmerit economic, social, and cultural advantages to children, increasingly creating "divergent destinies" for succeeding generations.

Finally, in prior editions we presented brief biographical vignettes on presidents, including George W. Bush and Barack Obama, as examples of how economic, social, and cultural factors shaped their rise to prominence. In the current edition, I have included a biographical vignette on Donald Trump and his family in this regard.

# Acknowledgments

Several people facilitated the completion of this fourth edition. I thank the editors at Rowman & Littlefield, especially Sarah Stanton, Carli Hansen, and Jehanne Schweitzer, for their support and assistance in shepherding this edition along. I also acknowledge the intellectual debt I owe to my stratification teachers and mentors, including John Murray, Norbert Wiley, Reeve Vanneman, and William Form. I also thank my students, who over the course of my career have deepened and sharpened my understanding of the processes of inequality.

In addition, I am grateful to anonymous reviewers who provided useful suggestions for revision for this edition. I am grateful for the institutional support provided by the University of North Carolina Wilmington. To my colleagues in the Department of Sociology and Criminology, I extend my appreciation for their ongoing encouragement and support.

I am especially thankful to my daughter, Dr. Catherine McNamee, coauthor of chapter 8, "Mobility through Marriage," for lending her expertise to this project. Cate is a lecturer in sociology specializing in family demography in the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work at Queens University in Belfast, Northern Ireland. I also wish to acknowledge my wife, Christine, for her generous understanding, patience, and helpful advice in completing this edition.

I am especially grateful to Dr. Robert K. Miller, Jr., my coauthor for the previous three editions of this book, and to whose memory this edition is dedicated. For more than thirty years, Rob and I collaborated on a number of projects. We spent countless hours deliberating on the topics and issues discussed in this book. His voice is very much still present in these pages, and words alone cannot express my intellectual indebtedness.

# 1

# The American Dream

## Origins and Prospects

> The reason they call it the American Dream is because you have to be asleep to believe it.
>
> —George Carlin, *Brain Droppings*

In the image of the American Dream, America is the land of opportunity. Presumably, if you work hard enough, play by the rules, and are talented enough, you can overcome any obstacle and achieve success. No matter where you start out in life, the sky is ostensibly the limit. According to the promise implied by the American Dream, you can go as far as your talents and abilities can take you.

Although most Americans enthusiastically endorse this image in abstract terms (Longoria 2009; McCall 2013), the lived experiences of many Americans tell them that factors other than merit also make a difference: "it takes money to make money" (inheritance); "it's not what you know, but who you know" (social capital); "what matters is being in the right place at the right time" (luck); "the playing field is not level" (discrimination); and "he or she married into money" (hypergamy).

Americans are ambivalent about economic inequality and often simultaneously hold contradictory principles about how income and wealth should be distributed (Longoria 2009; McCall 2013). While many Americans, for instance, proudly proclaim the virtues of "getting out of the system what you put into it" (meritocracy), they also steadfastly defend the right of individuals to dispose of their property when they die "as they personally see fit" (inheritance). These beliefs, however, pose a fundamental contradiction between freedom of choice at the individual level and equality of opportunity at the societal level. Simply put, to the extent that income and wealth are distributed on the basis of inheritance, they are not distributed on the basis of merit.

While "merit" is a characteristic of individuals, "meritocracy" is a characteristic of societies as a whole. Meritocracy refers to a social system as a whole in which individuals get ahead and earn rewards in direct proportion to their individual efforts and abilities. The term *meritocracy*, coined by British sociologist Michael Young in his dystopian novel *The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870–2033: An Essay on Education and Equality* (1961), is closely linked with the idea of the American Dream. Although Young envisioned a fictional and futuristic society operating as a meritocracy, the opportunity to achieve the American Dream implies a society that in fact already operates on those principles.

The term *American Dream* was first popularized by historian James Truslow Adams in his 1931 best-selling book, *The Epic of America*. Adams defined it as "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement" (1931, 404). In a general way, people understand the idea of the American Dream as the fulfillment of the promise of meritocracy. The American Dream is fundamentally rooted in the historical experience of the United States as a nation of immigrants. Unlike European societies dominated by hereditary aristocracies, the ideal in America was that its citizens were "free" to achieve on their own merits. The American Dream was the hope of fulfillment of individual freedom and the chance to succeed in the New World. As Thomas Jefferson (1813) put it, America would replace the European aristocracy of birth with a new American "natural aristocracy of talent and virtue."

In *Facing Up to the American Dream* (1995), Jennifer Hochschild identifies four tenets of the American Dream: 1) who—everyone regardless of origin or station; 2) what—reasonable anticipation or the hopefulness of success; 3) how—through actions under one's individual control; and 4) why—because of the association of true success with virtue in various ways; that is, "virtue leads to success, success makes a person virtuous, success indicates virtue, or apparent success is not real success unless one is also virtuous" (Hochschild 1995, 23).

Together, the tenets of the American Dream comprise an ideology of inequality. Ideologies provide socially acceptable explanations for the kind and extent of inequality within society. Ideologies are ultimately based on persuasion as a form of social power. Persuasion entails not just making claims but getting society's members to go along as well. It is not enough for some simply to have more than others. For a system of inequality to be stable over the long run, those who have more must convince those who have less that the distribution of who gets what is fair, just, proper, or the natural order of things. The greater the level of inequality, the more compelling and persuasive these explanations must appear to be.

The type of justification or ideology varies depending on the type of inequality. In feudal societies, for instance, the principle of "birthright" and the idea of "the divine right of kings" were used to justify the power and privilege of the nobility over commoners and peasants. In slave societies, slave owners used ideas like "the spoils of victory" or "innate superiority" to justify the ownership of other human beings. In traditional Indian caste societies, inequality was justified by a Hindu belief in

reincarnation; that is, one's place in this life was based on one's performance in past lives. In some forms of early Calvinist belief, salvation was seen as "preordained," and success in this life was taken as a sign of God's approval of the "elect." Currently in the United States inequality is "legitimized," or "explained," predominantly by an ideology of meritocracy. America is seen as the land of opportunity where people get out of the system what they put into it. Ostensibly, the most talented, hardest-working, and most virtuous get ahead. The lazy, shiftless, and inept fall behind. In this formulation, you may not be held responsible for where you start out in life, but you are responsible for where you end up, because the system is "fair" and provides ample opportunity to get ahead.

An important aspect of ideologies of inequality is that they do not have to be objectively "true" to persuade those who have less to accept less. Racism, for instance, is predicated on the false assumption of innate racial superiority. Racism involves a double falsehood: that there are biologically distinct categories within the human population (a view that modern biology soundly rejects), and that these "races" are innately and hierarchically ranked. Americans, including people of color, were long persuaded to accept these myths, and it took centuries of struggle to begin to counter them. Likewise, women long accepted a definition of themselves as inherently inferior to men. The women's movement challenged these definitions, and they too are now largely rejected.

Racism and sexism rest ultimately on biological assumptions of innate superiority and inferiority that can be demonstrated empirically to be false. From the point of view of those in power, however, an ideal ideology is one that cannot be proven either true or false, such as reincarnation or the divine right of kings. People do not act on the world as it is but as they perceive it to be, and as they make sense of it. For ideologies of inequality to "legitimize" particular social arrangements, it is not necessary that the ideology be objectively true or even falsifiable; what matters is that people accept and act on it.

Acceptance of meritocracy in America then is predicated not on what "is," but on the belief that the system of inequality is "fair" and it "works." According to the ideology of meritocracy, inequality is seen to be fair because everyone presumably has an equal (or at least an adequate) chance to succeed, and success is determined by individual merit. The system supposedly works because it is seen as providing an individual incentive to achieve what is good for society as a whole; that is, those who are most talented, the hardest-working, and the most virtuous get, and should get, the most rewards.

## INDIVIDUALISM AND THE ORIGINS OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

The American Dream has at its core an emphasis on the individual (Collero 2009). According to the ideology of the American Dream, we are "masters of our own fate."

We "go our own way" and "do our own thing." The American emphasis on individualism is not a historical accident but is firmly rooted in the religious, political, economic, and cultural experience of America as a nation of immigrants.

## Religious Origins

A key source of American individualism is the religious backgrounds of the first English colonists in America, who were mostly members of various Protestant religious sects. Subsequent immigrant populations had to adopt the language and cultural values of this population or risk isolation or exclusion. In this way, the cultural ideals of the initial group of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) colonists became the dominant cultural force in America.

The constellation of cultural values that became known as the "Protestant ethic" found its greatest expression among the various Puritan sects that formed the dominant religious backgrounds of many of the early American colonists. German sociologist Max Weber analyzed the principles of the Protestant ethic in his classic work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). The core of Weber's argument is that the twin ethics of hard work and self-denial were associated with the early development of capitalism. Hard work generated productivity, while self-denial encouraged investment through savings. Capitalism, particularly early capitalism, needed both a highly motivated labor force and investment "capital."

As part of the break with Catholicism, Protestantism emphasized an individual rather than communal relationship with God. Puritans in particular eschewed Catholicism's communalism and the elaborate ritual system associated with it. Instead, the emphasis was on a direct relationship with God through individual prayer and reading of the Bible. The Protestant Reformation also shifted the traditional Catholic view of work as "punishment" for "original sin" to the idea of work as a sacred calling, a mission from God to subdue nature and gain control over it. People should become instruments of God's will on Earth, and were called upon to transform the world and remake it in God's image, which Weber called "world mastery."

The greatest expression of this ethic was in the Puritan sect of Calvinism. The Calvinists believed in predestination, which meant that people did not earn salvation but were "elected" to it by God. This belief created among the followers what Weber called "salvation anxiety," which led individuals to attempt to ascertain whether they were among the elect. Individuals came to believe that worldly success could be taken as a sign of God's grace. So, driven by salvation anxiety, people worked very hard to become successful so that they could demonstrate to themselves and others that they were among the elect.

These Puritan values of individual "industry, frugality, and prudence" were reflected in early American moralistic novels (Weiss 1969) and were integrated into the core of an emerging national culture (Cullen 2003; Samuel 2012). The best-known of these was a popular series of 107 "rags-to-riches" novels by Horatio Alger (1832–1899), the son of a Unitarian minister and a Harvard graduate who for a

short time also served in the ministry. Puritan themes were reinforced as well in a series of widely used early American primary school readers, written by William McGuffey, who was also a minister turned writer.

While perhaps useful for stimulating the early development of capital, the diligence/asceticism twin ethic was not as useful for sustaining its continued expansion. The problem is that the twin ethic contains within it an internal economic contradiction. With everyone working hard to succeed, it does not take long to produce more than enough goods to meet minimum standards of living. The asceticism part of the ethic, while good for savings, depresses the demand for goods. This hard-work/no-play combination eventually results in an imbalance between supply and demand. For supply and demand to be reasonably balanced, something has to give. People need either to produce less or to consume more.

Americans came to consume more, motivated in part by the growth of media, which promoted consumerism on a massive scale. This was most evident especially in the period of prosperity following World War I, commonly known as the Roaring Twenties. The inhibitions, frugality, and austerity associated with the ascetic "no-play" part of the Puritan ethic waned. Consumption was redefined, not as an evil act of self-indulgence, but as a just reward for hard work. The "hard-work" part of the ethic was retained but transformed. Americans no longer worked hard simply for the glory of God, but increasingly for self-enhancement. In this way, the *Protestant* ethic has lost most of its religious underpinnings and survives now in American culture simply as the "work ethic," the moral underpinnings of which have severely eroded (Wuthnow 1996). Secularized vestiges of the Puritan tradition persist in the American values of self-reliance, independence, and individual responsibility.

### Political Origins

Politically, the American emphasis on individualism found its expression in revolution. In 1776, the Declaration of Independence proclaimed the sovereignty of a new nation and the inalienable right of its citizens to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." These were God-given individual rights that the state could not abridge. The spirit of *individual* freedom contained in this document became the blueprint for how the political system of the new nation would operate. The details of the new political blueprint were later incorporated into the Articles of Confederation, adopted in 1781, and expanded with the ratification of the US Constitution in 1788. In the spirit of the previous documents, the Constitution outlined a contract between the citizen and the state, emphasizing (especially in the Bill of Rights) the limits of state power over individual freedoms.

The colonists under British rule gradually became more and more resentful of the political and economic constraints imposed by the Crown. More than a century after the first permanent settlements, the colonists revolted. With the success of the American Revolution, a new government was established. The revolutionaries who laid out the plan for the new government had risked everything to gain political

and economic freedom, and they were determined not to re-create the same tyranny they had fought so bitterly to defeat. The new government would have no monarch and no unilateral system of control. In the aftermath of battles with the Crown, the framers of the new government were leery of centralized systems of political control. A constitutional system of checks and balances was formed to diffuse power and to hold those who wielded power accountable, and a compromise plan—the federal system—was worked out to balance the need for national unity with the desire for localized control. "Freedom" was a key ingredient in this formulation, although it had different meanings for different individuals: freedom of religion for some, freedom to acquire wealth for others, freedom from tyranny for yet others.

Alexis de Tocqueville, in his much-celebrated *Democracy in America* ([1835] 1967), praised America for the early success of its emerging democracy. Key to that success, according to de Tocqueville, was the American emphasis on individualism and equality. By individualism, de Tocqueville meant "a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellow creatures" ([1835] 1967, 118). By "equality," de Tocqueville meant the absence of aristocracy, which he also linked to individualism:

> Aristocracy has made a chain of all the members of the community, from the peasant to the king: democracy breaks that chain, and severs every link to it. As social conditions become more equal, the number of persons increases who, although they are neither rich enough nor powerful enough to exercise any great influence over their fellow creatures, have nevertheless acquired or retained sufficient education and fortune to satisfy their own wants. *They owe nothing to any man, they expect nothing from any man; they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands.* (Emphasis added) ([1835] 1967, 120)

In short, de Tocqueville maintained that in America individuals are free to achieve, not by virtue of hereditary title but by their own individual effort and merit. Thus, the emerging ideal of the American Dream incorporated two meanings of freedom: both political freedom from tyranny, and economic freedom to achieve on one's own merits.

## Economic Origins

Freedom from political tyranny, however, is not the same as "market freedom," although the two are often mistakenly viewed as inextricable. Free markets mean that prices, profits, and wages are determined by the "free flow" of market forces—the outcome of innumerable matches of supply and demand for goods and services unregulated by governments. In free-market societies, "the invisible hand of the market" operates: The sole determinant of investment—the sale and purchase of land, labor, and business—is individual calculation of costs and benefits intended to maximize profits. But free markets themselves do not guarantee democracy, civil liberties, or political freedom.

In one of the great coincidences of American history, America's economic blueprint for a free-market economy was laid out in the same year, 1776, as its political blueprint for governance was set forth in the Declaration of Independence. In that pivotal year, the Scottish economist Adam Smith published *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* ([1776] 1976), which was adopted in the United States as the informal bible of American free-market capitalism. It emphasized rational *self*-interest, *individual* competition, *private* ownership, and *laissez-faire* principles. At the time of the publication of Smith's book, roughly three-fourths of the new nation's labor force was, in fact, self-employed, comprising mostly small farmers, merchants, and artisans. A large number of mostly small producers encouraged market competition. Government regulation of business was minimal. Indeed, the economic blueprint seemed to fit.

In feudal economies, all subjects of the aristocracy primarily work for the aristocracy. Peasants did not own land and had little opportunity to move up in the system. With the decline of feudalism and the rise of market economies, free markets emerged. Individuals could own their *own* land, be their *own* bosses, and move up on the basis of their *own* efforts. In America, the absence of a feudal past, the abundance of land, and periodic regional as well as local labor shortages enhanced these opportunities, thus grounding these notions in the formative stages of the development of America's national value system.

It is important to point out, however, that the individual rights and free-market blueprint in America never applied equally to everyone. From the very beginning, indentured servants, slaves, non-WASPs, women, and others were systematically excluded from both the protections of the Constitution and the opportunities of free-market capitalism. Despite these exclusions, the dominant cultural image of individual rights and the free market prevailed.

## Cultural Origins

The "can-do" rugged individualism associated with the American Dream was further reinforced by the formative experience of the American Western frontier. The "pioneer spirit" of striking out on one's own and staking a claim was captured in American author Horace Greeley's clarion call to "Go West, young man." The absence of formal government on the frontier, including effective law enforcement, also undoubtedly contributed to feelings of independence and self-reliance. Historian Frederick Jackson Turner, in his classic book *The Frontier in American History* (1947), argued that the frontier was central to the development of American individualism. Turner further linked the rugged individualism of the pioneer with the ideals of democracy: "Quite as deeply fixed in the pioneer's mind as the ideal of individuals was the ideal of democracy. He had a passionate hatred for aristocracy, monopoly and special privilege; he believed in simplicity, economy and the rule of the people" (1947, 37).

Contemporary historians have sharply criticized Turner's largely nostalgic and romantic view of the frontier. But it is precisely this idealized image of the American

frontier that has filtered into the American consciousness, reinforced by countless novels, TV Westerns, and Hollywood feature films. The frontier is portrayed as a rough and dangerous place, but one with abundant opportunity. Those who were able and willing could tame the wilderness, overcome any obstacle, and realize the American Dream.

## MERIT AND NONMERIT EXPLANATIONS FOR INEQUALITY

The American ethos of rugged individualism extends to culturally dominant explanations of behavior, attitudes, and life circumstances. That is, Americans strongly tend to look first to the characteristics of individuals to explain what happens to them. At the same time, there is an uneasy awareness that we are not entirely in control of our own fates. We are also all part of a social order not of our making or choosing that nevertheless profoundly affects us.

This tension between internal (merit) and external (nonmerit) factors in accounting for what happens to us is reflected in rival theoretical explanations for inequality in the social sciences. In sociology, these positions are represented by the functional and conflict theories of inequality. According to the functional theory, all societies make some provision or social arrangement for acquiring and distributing the resources necessary for the mutual survival of their members. As a result of these collective efforts, there are tasks that must be done in society as a whole, and individuals must be available to do them. According to this theory, some tasks are more important than others, and some individuals are more competent than others. In order to ensure that the most competent individuals fill the most important and demanding tasks in society, an incentive system of unequal rewards evolves. This unequal system of rewards is seen as necessary to entice the most capable individuals to take on the burden of, and responsibility for, performing these demanding tasks, and to develop the skills necessary to do so. Those who perform these most demanding and exclusive tasks both deserve and receive the most rewards. Or, to summarize the theory in more colloquial terms, those who put the most into the system, get the most out of it.

Conflict theories of inequality take very different views. According to these theories, the essential cause of inequality is conflict over surplus. Surplus refers to whatever is left over in the society as a whole after its members' minimum survival needs are met. Conflict over surplus produces winners and losers. Ever since societies have produced surplus, some have managed to get more of it than others. Winners may initially get more of the surplus because they are the shrewdest or most enterprising, or because they are the most devious, the most unscrupulous, or the most ruthless. Once "winners" accumulate more surplus than others by whatever means, they can expend a portion of the accumulated surplus both to protect their existing surplus and to acquire additional surplus. In addition, winners develop ideologies—nar-

ratives of justification regarding the *right* to own. Finally, accumulated surplus is transferred intergenerationally through the process of inheritance, thereby tending to perpetuate existing inequalities across generations. To summarize conflict theories in more colloquial terms, them that has, gets.

These sociological perspectives and other versions of them in other disciplines have been debated at length (cf. Kerbo 2012, 83–148; McNamee and Miller 1998). It is not my purpose here to fully explicate these theories but instead to put the current discussion into theoretical context. Functional theories imply a system of meritocracy in which individuals get ahead based on their individual talents and abilities. Conflict theories, on the other hand, imply a system of inheritance in which people's life chances are largely determined by their starting point within an existing structure of inequality. Functional theorists focus on individual characteristics such as talent, ability, and hard work as the primary determinants of inequality. Conflict theorists focus on nonmerit factors such as inheritance, discrimination, and variation in opportunities as the primary determinants of inequality.

Merit and nonmerit factors are not mutually exclusive explanations for individual economic outcomes. Such outcomes have both individual and structural causes. Indeed, a major challenge of social science research is to sort out how these factors interact in ways that fully account for the kind and extent of inequality that does exist, and with what consequences. It is the contention of this book, however, that the dominant ideology of meritocracy has historically tended to overestimate the effects of merit on economic outcomes and to underestimate the effects of nonmerit factors.

## DOWNSIZING THE AMERICAN DREAM

In important ways, the prospects for achieving the American Dream have expanded over time. In particular, since the nation's founding, a number of groups—including minorities, and especially women—have been afforded greater economic, political, and social opportunities. Progress on the expansion of opportunities to groups formerly discriminated against or excluded, however, has been slow and uneven. While there is ongoing discrimination and the effects of past discrimination continue into the present, the overall expansion of greater opportunity to a wider segment of American society is undeniable. From its humble beginnings as a British colony, America has emerged as the wealthiest and most powerful nation in the world. For most of its history and for many, but not all, of its citizens, succeeding generations have enjoyed higher standards of living and expanded opportunities.

Recently, however, the prospects for attaining the American Dream have been diminishing for a large segment of the American population. The American Dream implies not just a general hopefulness for the future and a formula for success, but also a sense of what the fulfillment of the dream would mean. Although specifics vary, several outcomes are generally associated with the fulfillment of the American Dream, including home ownership, improved life chances for the next generation,

opportunities to get rich, and a secure and comfortable retirement. In each case, the chances of achieving these aspects of the American Dream have dimmed, especially for younger generations.

## Home Ownership

In a US Census study, appropriately entitled *Tracking the American Dream*, F. John Devaney (1994) examined housing trends in the fifty-year period between 1940 and 1990. In terms of fulfillment of the dream, the results are mixed. Between 1890 and 1940, rates of home ownership remained at slightly less than one-half of the American population. In the post–World War II period, stimulated by postwar prosperity and veterans' loans as part of the GI Bill, rates of ownership increased dramatically, from 44 percent in 1940 to 62 percent in 1960. Subsidized by government highway funds that linked surrounding communities with central cities, this was also a period of rapid expansion of American suburbs. For many, the ranch house in the suburbs with the two-car garage and meticulously maintained lawn symbolized the fulfillment of the dream. Commuters in these bedroom communities, who worked in the urban areas and had access to their cultural amenities, felt shielded from the problems of central cities. For them, it was the best of both worlds.

Yet, economic success—which resulted in white flight to the suburbs in the postwar period—exacerbated the problems of central cities and, in many cases, increased the rates of segregation and racial tension. The tax base of urban areas eroded along with public services, including schools, police and fire protection, and sanitation. The fulfillment of the dream for some was, for others, a nightmare of inner-city crime, drugs, unemployment, poverty, and despair.

After 1960, average quarterly home-ownership rates remained stable, hovering around 63 to 64 percent until the mid-1990s, when rates began to steadily increase, reaching a peak at the height of the housing bubble in 2004 at 69 percent (US Census Bureau 2016a). Home-ownership rates began to fall in the aftermath of the mortgage crisis that precipitated the Great Recession of 2008, resulting in a general financial meltdown, record numbers of foreclosures and bankruptcies, as well as a series of bank failures leading to a massive $700 billion federal bailout. Many Americans lost their homes altogether, or were "underwater," owing more on their mortgages than the value of their homes as housing prices plummeted. Mortgages became harder to attain as banks required higher levels of creditworthiness to obtain new mortgages. By the end of 2016, the home-ownership rate had fallen to 64 percent (US Census Bureau 2016a). Clearly, the prospect of "home ownership" as a central marker of having achieved the American Dream has dimmed in the decade since the onset of the Great Recession.

Moreover, it is important to note that these rates of "home ownership" are based on the government's definition of "owner-occupied" housing, which combines both homes that are mortgaged and homes that are owned outright. Mortgaged "home-owners" don't really "own" their homes until they pay off their mortgages. Over the

long run, the percentage of homes in America that are owned outright has sharply declined over time. In 1890, for instance, 72 percent of owner-occupied residents owned their own homes outright (Devaney 1994). In 2015, only slightly more than one-third (35 percent) of owner-occupied residents owned their homes outright (US Census Bureau 2015).

### Better Opportunities for the Next Generation

Another aspect of the American Dream is the idea that each new generation will have a higher standard of living and better opportunities than the previous one. For a long period of time in American history—with some stalls and notable setbacks, such as the period of the Great Depression—this was largely the case. As America moved from a mostly agrarian to a mostly industrial economy, opportunities expanded along with generally high rates of growth—in the economy as a whole, and with overall increases in the general standard of living. This was especially the case in the post–World War II era of general prosperity, in which the baby boomer generation came of age. Yet a combination of deindustrialization, globalization, and technological automation, beginning in the 1970s and accelerating ever since, has reduced overall opportunity, especially for younger cohorts and those born closer to the bottom of the system.

A recent comprehensive study of cohort mobility (Chetty et al. 2016) showed that chances for adult children to have higher real incomes than their parents (adjusted for inflation) have drastically declined in the past sixty years. For those born in 1940, the chance to out-earn their parents was 92 percent, compared to 79 percent of those born in 1950, 62 percent born in 1960, 61 percent for those born in 1970, and only 50 percent for those born in 1980.

Another way this decline in the prospects of attaining this aspect of the American Dream has been manifested is a steep decline in the home-ownership rate for young adults. As previously noted, overall rates of home ownership have declined since the Great Recession, but rates of home ownership for adults under the age of thirty-five have fallen more sharply, from 42 percent in 2007 to 35 percent in 2015 (US Census Bureau 2016b). While fewer young adults are buying homes, more are living at home with parents (sometimes referred to as "boomerangs"). In 2014, 32 percent of eighteen- to thirty-four-year-olds were living in their parents' homes, compared to 20 percent of the corresponding age group in 1960 (Fry 2016).

Several factors have contributed to these trends, including increased age at first marriage and childbearing, growing student loan debt, weakening labor market, and more stringent mortgage-lending criteria. Although survey results show that young adults continue to desire to buy homes instead of renting or living with parents, their capacity to do so has greatly diminished (Yu et al. 2015). For many Millennials, the delay in buying a home means a delay in building equity in a home, which is typically a family's greatest financial asset and primary basis for building wealth (Yu et al. 2015).

Providing a college education for children has been another important aspect of the American Dream. An increasing proportion of Americans have been able to realize this part of the American Dream. In 1910, only 3 percent of Americans twenty-five or older had completed a bachelor's degree or higher; by 2015, this figure had risen to 32 percent (US Department of Education, 2017a). Although more Americans are entering and completing college than in prior years, the costs of college education have been increasing at a rate far greater than either increases in family income or the general cost of living. For the 2013–2014 academic year, the average annual cost for tuition, fees, room, and board was $18,110 at public four-year colleges, and $35,987 at private nonprofit and for-profit colleges (US Department of Education 2017b). Controlling for inflation, these costs have more than doubled over the past thirty years for both public and private institutions (US Department of Education 2017b). States have drastically reduced funds for state-sponsored higher education over this period, and as a result a greater burden for increasing college expenses has shifted to students and their families. Parents and students are increasingly unable to afford these growing costs. As a result, more students themselves are working, taking longer to graduate, and in general taking on heavy student debt loads to finance their own educations. According to the Institute for College Access and Success (2016), nearly seven out of ten graduating 2015 college seniors had some level of student debt upon graduation, with an average debt per student of $30,100.

With an increase in college costs and debt and a flooded labor market for new college graduates, the overall return on the investment is being called into question. To put it simply, the labor force is being flooded with new college graduates. The economy is producing fewer college-level jobs than there are new college graduates. The result has been an increase in both underemployment (e.g., college graduates waiting tables) and credential inflation (employers requiring higher levels of education for positions without a corresponding increase in the skill or knowledge demands of the positions themselves).

### Chance to Get Rich

Having at least a chance to get rich holds great appeal for most Americans, and has historically been a key component of the American Dream. The appeal is keenly felt, as evidenced by the excitement generated by state lotteries offering jackpots that soar into the millions. During the dot-com boom for the 1990s, the Internet became the equivalent of a modern "gold rush" as entrepreneurs anxiously sought to stake their dot-com website claims—until the bubble burst in 2000, much like the catastrophic collapse of the housing bubble that led to the Great Recession of 2008. According to the results of a *New York Times* poll (2014), the proportion of Americans who believe that it is possible to "start out poor in this country, work hard, and become rich" declined from 80 percent in 2005 to 64 percent in 2014, reflecting a sharp decline in the overall confidence in this prospect.

Self-employment, which is examined in greater detail in chapter 6, is relevant here because most meteoric rises in personal wealth come not from wages or salaries but through entrepreneurial activity—starting and owning businesses. With the decline of family farms and businesses and the ascendance of corporations in the twentieth century, rates of self-employment plummeted. New business starts are notoriously risky. For most Americans, these factors have decreased rather than increased the likelihood of "rags-to-riches" scenarios.

### Secure and Comfortable Retirement

A secure and comfortable retirement is, in many ways, the closing chapter of the American Dream. In modern America, a comfortable retirement is achieved through a combination of savings, investments, pensions, and Social Security. In earlier times, people rarely "retired." Those who lived on farms, for instance, relied on adult children to provide for them if they survived and were no longer able to work. Through much of the earlier history of the United States, life expectancy was short, savings were limited, pensions were rare, and Social Security was nonexistent.

With the rise of industrial America and union-negotiated contracts, pensions became more common. In 1933, as part of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal initiatives, the federally sponsored Social Security system was established. Until the mid-1970s, poverty rates for those over sixty-five were substantially higher than for other age groups. Many retirees were faced with small and fixed incomes and the erosion of purchasing power as prices increased. The longer they lived, the poorer they became. In 1965, however, Congress passed Medicare, which provided guaranteed access to health care for Americans over sixty-five. This greatly reduced the individual costs of health care for this population. In addition, in the mid-1970s Social Security payments were automatically adjusted to the Consumer Price Index, eliminating a major source of "fixed incomes" for elderly. These benefits, combined with post–World War II economic prosperity, greatly improved the economic conditions for elderly Americans, who now have a rate of poverty significantly below the national average.

Nevertheless, the future of secure retirement is in serious jeopardy. The Social Security fund is in trouble. Unless taxes are raised or benefits or eligibility reduced, the Social Security system will eventually become insolvent. As the large postwar baby boomer cohort becomes increasingly eligible for benefits, current projections are that after 2020, the Treasury will use trust fund assets in excess of interest earnings until the trust fund reserves are depleted in 2034, after which the fund will be sufficient to pay only about three-fourths of the scheduled benefits through the end of the projection period in 2090 (US Social Security Administration 2016).

There are other ominous developments. More than half of American workers have no employer-sponsored pension plans, and that percentage is increasing over time (Center for Retirement Research 2016). Of workers with pension plans, an increasing proportion of those plans are "defined-contribution" benefits tied to mutual

funds and other stock programs instead of "defined-benefits" paid as guarantees to workers. In 1983, 62 percent of those who had pension plans had "defined-benefit" plans, compared to only 17 percent by 2013 (Center for Retirement Research 2014). As a result, pensions are not as secure as they were in the past because of potential downturns in the market, and the possibility of businesses going bankrupt prior to workers' retirements.

For older Americans, assets in home equity had always been part of their "nest egg" for retirement, but this too is in jeopardy. Housing prices plummeted during the recession of 2008 and have not yet recovered to pre-recession levels. Although rates of owner-occupied housing among Americans sixty-five and older remained constant between 2001 and 2011, at around 80 percent, the proportion of those Americans in owner-occupied housing who were still paying mortgages increased from 22 percent to 30 percent, with the median amount still owed on mortgages over the same time period increasing by 82 percent (US Consumer Financial Protection Bureau 2014).

Personal savings are not sufficient for most Americans to offset these losses. By the end of 2016, the average personal savings rate for Americans was 5.5 percent of disposable personal income (US Department of Commerce 2017), up somewhat from Great Recession levels, but still low by historical standards for the United States, and low compared to most other advanced industrial societies. A recent Associated Press study based on Federal Reserve data estimated that 35 percent of Americans in their prime earning years have saved nothing in a retirement account, and had no access to a traditional pension; of those who had managed some savings, the typical amount for this group was only $73,200, or about fifteen months of median household income (Choe 2016).

The American population as a whole is "graying" as birth rates remain low and life expectancy continues to increase. Pressures on Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid are accelerating as the front end of a large cohort of baby boomers turns sixty-five at the rate of over ten thousand a day. The costs of health care continue to increase at a rate much higher than the general increase in the cost of living. These facts are significant because the greatest proportion of health-care expenditure is for the elderly. It is not at all clear that the health needs of an increasingly aging population can be met in the coming years.

In some significant ways, then, the American Dream of home ownership, increasing prospects for the next generation, and a comfortable retirement has been downsized in recent years. Whatever the likelihood of attaining the American Dream in the future, however, one thing is certain—it will be more attainable for those closer to the top of the system than the bottom.

## PLAN OF THE BOOK

In chapter 2, "On Being Made of the Right Stuff," I identify key individual traits usually associated with the meritocratic formula for success: innate talent, hard work,

proper attitude, and playing by the rules. I then examine the relationship between these characteristics and where people end up in the system. If getting ahead were simply a matter of being individually made of the right stuff, it would be a relatively short and simple story to tell. However, there is much more to it than this, and the remainder of this book is devoted to telling that story.

Subsequent chapters identify key nonmerit structural barriers to mobility that neutralize or suppress the effects of individual merit. The most consequential determinant of where people end up in the economic pecking order of society is where they start in the first place. Inheritance and the "staggered start" are nonmerit factors discussed in chapter 3, "The Silver Spoon." The nonmerit advantages of being born wealthy are cumulative and substantial, including having a high childhood standard of living, friends and relatives in high places, cultural advantages, infusions of parental capital while parents are still alive, insulation against failure, better health and greater life expectancy, and inheritance of bulk estates when parents die. Growing up in a privileged family entails greater opportunities to acquire and develop individual competence as well, and having that competence recognized and rewarded. These advantages accrue not only to the wealthiest of Americans, but in varying degrees to all those born closer to the top of the system than the bottom.

In chapter 4, "It's Not What You Know But . . . ," two important nonmerit factors are discussed. While part of the American folklore of social placement, these factors are nevertheless typically underestimated in their effects: whom you know (social capital), and fitting in (cultural capital). *Social capital* refers to social resources: individual and family connections that mediate access to opportunity. *Cultural capital* refers to a set of cultural resources—bodies of often esoteric and specialized information and knowledge, including style, bearing, manner, and self-presentation skills—that are needed to travel and be fully accepted in high-powered social circles. These resources are acquired beginning in childhood and typically reinforced and extended throughout the life course. As with the ownership of wealth, the possession of social and cultural resources is not necessarily evidence of individual merit, but provides substantial yet often subtle nonmerit advantages, especially to the offspring of the rich and powerful.

In chapter 5, "Making the Grade," the complex relationship between education and the American Dream is examined by evaluating competing arguments concerning the relationship between education and social mobility. One view is that education serves as a mechanism that identifies and selects intelligent, talented, and motivated individuals, regardless of class background, and provides educational training in direct proportion to individual merit. The amounts and kinds of education achieved are taken as indicators of merit and used as criteria of eligibility for occupations and the material rewards attached to them. An alternate view is that the American educational system is highly tracked by social class, reflecting and recreating existing inequalities in society across generations. In this way, education is both a merit and a nonmerit factor. That is, students "earn" educational credentials (merit), but access to education—and, especially, quality education—is unequally distributed by family background and social class (nonmerit).

Besides education, the other most historically significant pathway for upward social mobility in America has been through some form of entrepreneurial activity. Americans embrace the ideal of the "self-made person" who starts with little or nothing and grows a successful business. In chapter 6, "I Did It My Way," entrepreneurship and its central place in the American Dream is discussed. This chapter examines the rise of the giant corporations, the concomitant decline in self-employment, the numerous barriers to self-employment, and their implications for entrepreneurial activity. The growing concentration, collective assets, and associated economies of scale of the corporate giants tend to undercut competition from small companies and discourage new entrants. Americans cling to the historical legacy and language of free enterprise and the entrepreneurial spirit, even though it no longer accurately describes the circumstances of the vast majority of Americans who now work for somebody else.

Upon leaving school, most Americans enter the "rat race" of the labor market. In chapter 7, "The Luck Factor," I examine the relationship between the supply of people available to fill jobs (supply) and the kinds of jobs available to fill (demand). While individuals have some control over how skilled they are, they do not have control over what kinds of jobs are available, how many jobs are available, or how many others are seeking those jobs. Being in the right place at the right time also matters, not just for getting a good job, but for acquiring great wealth as well. Striking it rich—whether it be through inheritance, entrepreneurial ventures, investments, or even hitting the lottery—necessarily involves at least some degree of just plain dumb luck.

After launching a career as an adult of some sort, the next significant stage of the life course has historically most often been marriage. Chapter 8, "Marriage and Mobility," examines the impact of marriage on prospects for mobility. For the most part, people tend to marry people of similar social backgrounds. To the extent that the rich marry the rich and the poor marry the poor, economic, social, and cultural advantages or disadvantages are consolidated and passed on to future generations. In some cases, however, people can become upwardly mobile through marriage. Because men in general typically control access to wealth and power, this particular indirect pathway to mobility has historically been more available to women than men.

The effects of discrimination, which are typically encountered throughout the life cycle, are discussed in chapter 9, "An Unlevel Playing Field: Racism, Sexism, and Other Isms." Simply put, discrimination is the antithesis of merit. Where there is discrimination, there is no meritocracy, because discriminatory allocations of opportunity and rewards discount or ignore merit and instead replace it with nonmerit criteria. Although discrimination against racial minorities and women is the most visible and damaging, at least in terms of costs and numbers affected, other forms of discrimination also interfere with the pursuit of the American Dream, including heterosexism, ageism, ableism (discrimination against the disabled), religious bigotry, and "lookism" (preference for the attractive). While these forms of discrimination claim fewer overall victims than racism and sexism, it would be difficult to convince

the victims of these forms of discrimination that their effects are any less real. Moreover, many are subject to multiple forms of discrimination. Discrimination, which is encountered throughout the life course, often trumps merit. The more forms of discrimination that one is subject to, the more effective the trump.

In the concluding section, chapter 10, "Growing Inequality in the Twenty-First Century: What Can Be Done," the implications of deindustrialization, globalization, automation, the long wage recession, and increasing economic inequality since the 1970s on the sustainability of the American Dream in the twenty-first century are discussed. Strategies that individual Americans have developed to cope with the problems created by these changes are examined, along with potential policy changes and reforms that might reduce inequality and make the American system as a whole more meritocratic.

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# 2

# On Being Made of the Right Stuff

## The Case for Merit

The rich feel full of merit.

—Mason Cooley, US aphorist

In 1959, seven astronauts were chosen for NASA's Mercury space program. These seven men, selected from an initial pool of thousands of military pilots,[1] were considered the best and the brightest, the strongest and the bravest. In short, they were made of the "right stuff."[2] Getting ahead in America is widely seen in these terms. The popular perception in America is that those who are made of the right stuff are the cream of the crop that rises to the top, whereas the dregs fall to the bottom.

Although there are variations on the theme of meritocracy, I have identified four key ingredients in the American formula for being made of the right stuff: talent, the right attitude, hard work, and moral character. Each of these will be reviewed in terms of its impact on getting ahead.

### INNATE TALENTS AND ABILITIES

Innate individual talent, natural ability, or some variant are among the most important factors that Americans attribute to the importance of getting ahead (McCall 2013). The central issue here is not whether innate capacity of all sorts helps some people get ahead. It clearly does. The issue is how much difference does it make, for how many people, and under what circumstances? This is a complex issue, and it is difficult to know precisely what mix of innate endowments and environmental influences has an effect on life outcomes. Most social scientists, neuroscientists, and geneticists now conclude that trying to isolate the effects of "nature" from "nurture"

in predicting the probabilities of life outcomes is a wild goose chase; rather than one or the other, what matters is combinations of both, and how those factors interact in complex ways (cf. Conley and Fletcher 2017). It is clear, however, that innate capacity alone accounts for nothing. Our innate biological capacity as human beings is analogous to the "hardware" of a computer. A computer can have tremendous capacity for processing and analyzing information as indicated by the amount of memory available and the processing speed. Nurture or learning for human beings is similar to "software" or programming in computers. Computing capacity alone does nothing without either the input of information to process or programming that tells the computer what to do with that information.

Among innate capacities for getting ahead, the most prominent capacity that is usually discussed is raw intelligence or cognitive ability. IQ tests, the standard measure of intellectual capacity, have a long and controversial history. One of the problems in measuring raw intellectual capacity is that it is unmeasurable at birth. By the time a reliable IQ test can be administered (usually around age four or so), individuals have already been subject to a myriad of environmental influences. Indeed, we know that the first environment of human beings—in utero—can profoundly affect IQ. It is possible, for instance, that a fetus would have the raw biological capacity of a genius but that conditions in utero—such as maternal malnutrition or fetal alcohol syndrome—could result in a child born with severe mental retardation. Even identical twins with the same genes can be alternately affected by one twin in utero taking more nutrients from the mother than the other (Conley and Fletcher 2017, 164). Or a newborn could be born with a potentially high IQ only to be rendered inoperative because of early exposure to lead poisoning, known to cause brain damage and hamper future cognitive development, much less the effects of countless other environmental influences prior to an age of reliable testability for IQ. So one of the major controversial aspects of IQ tests, then, is "hereditability," or the extent to which IQ is strictly genetic. While estimates vary, the general consensus is that IQ tests by young childhood are on average estimated to be only two-thirds genetic and one-third environmental (Conley and Fletcher 2017).

The hereditability controversy was reignited with the 1994 publication of Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*. Herrnstein and Murray asserted that intelligence is largely genetically inherited and that it largely determines socioeconomic success. Herrnstein and Murray argued that the distribution of intelligence in the general population takes the form of a symmetrical bell curve, or what statisticians refer to as a normal distribution. In normal distributions, the most common score is the average, with most cases bunched closely around it. Variation around the middle is symmetrical in either direction (below and above the average), with most cases close to the average, and the number of cases dropping off rapidly the farther away from the average, becoming rare at either end of the distribution.

Herrnstein and Murray further argued that barriers to upward mobility on the basis of natural talent have largely been eliminated, and that a new "cognitive elite" is

emerging in America. They contended that as colleges and universities have opened opportunities to a broader economic spectrum of students, educational attainment is increasingly based on academic performance and less on the inheritance of wealth and privilege. Moreover, with new technological demands, there is an increasing premium in society on intellectual prowess.

The publication of *The Bell Curve* was met with a barrage of criticism (cf. Fischer et al. 1996; Bowles et al. 2005). The upshot of the many criticisms of *The Bell Curve* is that as a result of faulty assumptions and measurement error, Herrnstein and Murray greatly overestimated the influence of innate intelligence (nature) and greatly underestimated the influence of environmental factors (nurture). Most recently, rigorous reanalysis by Dalton Conley and Jason Fletcher (2017) found no empirical support for the three main assertions in *The Bell Curve*: that the effect of genetic endowment on economic outcomes is increasing over time; that through intermarriage, the "cognitive elite" are passing on enhanced genetic endowments to their children compared to the children of the noncognitive elite; and that because of higher birthrates among the noncognitive elites, there is a decline in cognitive capacity in the population as a whole.

Other research shows that IQ is only modestly correlated with income (.30) and negligibly correlated with wealth (.16) (Zagorsky 2007). That is, the vast amount of variance in what you earn (income) and especially what you own (wealth) is most likely due to something else. Furthermore, it stands to reason that IQ would be more associated with income than wealth. IQ is likely to have at least some bearing on the capacity to do certain kinds of more complicated tasks for which some individuals would receive higher compensation than others. Wealth acquisition, however, is more about owning than doing (for instance, it does not take superior intellect to inherit the family fortune). Most people know intuitively that the question "If you're so smart, then why aren't you rich?" is not really a question at all, but a rhetorical comment implying that there is much more to monetary "success" than intelligence, whatever that means and however it might be measured.

IQ is likely to make the most difference at the extremes, especially at the lower end of the scale. It is unlikely that those with severe mental disabilities, for instance, could become neurosurgeons. And it probably helps to have a lot of inherent capacity to perform high-level and intellectually demanding tasks, although other factors might determine who makes the most of what capacities they have. It is not required to be the "smartest" to perform most high-level tasks, but rather to be "smart enough," and a fairly high proportion of the population is likely to have sufficient mental capacity to perform most tasks.

Beyond the issue of whether generalized raw intellectual capacity can be measured precisely or what minimal thresholds of capacity might be required, other dimensions of what most people would consider "smart" could vary independently. One might distinguish, for instance, "street smarts," "people smarts," or "book smarts" from raw intellectual capacity alone. Individuals with these various kinds of "smarts," who may or may not score high on standardized IQ tests, would nevertheless be

perceived by others as clever, shrewd, or knowledgeable in ways that may have an economic advantage.

Besides raw intellectual capacity, other presumably innate talents and abilities are also popularly perceived as part of the merit formula. These include, but are not limited to, athletic and artistic abilities. These traits are often associated with meteoric social mobility. The view that such talent can propel someone from rags to riches is not entirely without foundation. When people think of who is really rich in America, professional athletes and artists (e.g., actors, singers, writers), who command huge salaries for their services, often come to mind first. Although star entertainers and athletes earn huge annual incomes for their services, such as singer Taylor Swift ($170 million), radio personality Howard Stern ($85 million), singer Madonna ($76.5 million), basketball player LeBron James ($77 million), basketball player Kevin Durant ($56 million), and actor Matt Damon ($55 million) (*Forbes* 2017a), the really big money in America comes not from working for a living at all but from owning income-producing property. Among the one hundred highest-paid celebrities in America who are athletes or entertainers, none is among the wealthiest four hundred Americans. It is instructive that while there are no star athletes among the richest four hundred Americans, more than a dozen on the list are owners of professional sports teams. And while there are no actors included in the list of the wealthiest four hundred Americans, there are two movie producers, George Lucas and Steven Spielberg, who own their own production companies (*Forbes* 2017b).

Although not typically among the four hundred wealthiest of all Americans, celebrity athletes and entertainers are well known to the general public. Several come from modest or even poor social backgrounds. The phenomenal success of these celebrities tends to reinforce the public perception that in America, you can go as far as your talents and abilities can take you.

One could argue that "superstar" athletes, for instance, are truly talented and have extraordinary physical qualities not available to the average person (e.g., size, speed, agility, hand–eye coordination). Raw talent alone, however, is not enough. Talent has to be cultivated through recruitment and opportunities for training. Potential talent can go unnoticed, particularly in the absence of opportunities to develop and exhibit it. Training may be expensive and not easily available to people of modest means, particularly in such sports as golf, tennis, swimming, and figure skating.

Sociologist William Chambliss (1989), who studied the world of champion Olympic swimmers, suggests that the concept of inherent talent in and of itself is essentially useless because inherent talent as a cause cannot be separated from its effects. That is, talent cannot be used to distinguish success and failure because one does not "know" it is there until success occurs. Chambliss argues that the thresholds for natural ability needed for athletic success (minimum physical strength, coordination, heart/lung capacity, and the like) are remarkably low. Many of the key factors to success in the swimming world are unrelated to raw talent, like living in warm climates, having wealthy and supportive parents, and the availability of expert coaching. Where milliseconds often separate "winners" and "losers," Chambliss points out

that what distinguishes champions from mere contenders is not inherent physical superiority but more mundane considerations, such as technique and training.

Historically, the conspicuous lack of people of color in these individual middle- and upper-middle-class sports is telling. Team sports such as baseball, basketball, and football have generally been more accessible (at least recently), and this is reflected in the racial and socioeconomic makeup of the athletes in these professional sports. Overall, there is a strong relationship between type of sport and the race and class of origin of the professionals within it, which strongly suggests that differential recruitment and opportunity are at work rather than athletic prowess alone (Buffington 2015; Coakley 2017). In this regard, it is also noteworthy that athletics as a means of upward social mobility, regardless of talent level, is more available to males than females, since there are more paid professional opportunities in men's sports. Even in sports in which both men and women compete, until quite recently prize money has been much greater for men.

The notion of raw artistic talent as a means of upward social mobility is even more suspect. Although "talented" Hollywood actors make millions, it is not clear that the potential pool of "talent" is small. It is unknown how many potential Meryl Streeps or Matt Damons are out there, but chances are great that there are more of them than there are potential Steffi Grafs or Kobe Bryants. While there may be millions in the general population who could become movie stars (if "discovered," with the "right" breaks, the "right" acting coaches, the "right" roles, the "right" looks, and so forth), there is probably a much smaller potential pool of individuals who can dunk a basketball from the foul line. This is indicated, for instance, by the high number of crossovers from sports to acting (or broadcasting) but not the other way around.

Beyond the performing arts, untapped creative potential extends to the potential for scientific innovation as well. As with other extraordinary "talents," these too have to be nurtured even to be noticed much less developed to an elite level. In a recent comprehensive study of individuals filing US patents, Alex Bell and his associates (2017) found large disparities in innovation rates by socioeconomic class, race, and gender. They note, for instance, that if women, minorities, and children from low-income families were to invent at the same rate as white men who grew up in high-income families, the rate of innovation in America would quadruple. The study refers to children from these disadvantaged groups with high scientific and mathematical aptitude and low rates of innovation as "lost Einsteins."

Unlike celebrity athletes and entertainers, scientific inventors are typically not well known to the general public. The presumed link between raw talent and celebrity athletes and artists in particular tends to reinforce the meritocracy myth. The presumption is that if *some* celebrities with these talents came from humble origins, then *anyone* who had those potential talents could do the same. However, it does not follow that if *only* those with talent rise to the level of celebrity athlete or artist, then *all* those with talent will become celebrity athletes or artists. Indeed, the actual probabilities of social ascent through athletics or the arts are extremely remote. The illusion of potential success in glamour areas such as sports and entertainment ends

up being a "mobility trap" for many youthful aspirants who end up investing time and effort in the long-shot pursuit of fame and fortune at the expense of more realistic avenues of social mobility (Wiley 1967).

In short, in the meritocratic formula for success, it is clear that innate capacity alone accounts for nothing. Innate talents and abilities do not just spontaneously produce life outcomes. Minimum biological capacity for success in most human endeavors is probably modest. Beyond minimum thresholds (e.g., smart enough, coordinated enough, and so on), additional increments of capacity probably have negligible economic return for most people. Moreover, there is undoubtedly substantially more inherent potential capacity among individuals in any society than is ever identified, cultivated, or realized.

## HAVING THE RIGHT ATTITUDE

Beyond innate talents and cognitive skills, various attitudes and behavioral traits are often presumed to be associated with economic success. In more familiar terms, these attitudes and traits are summarized by the phrase "having the right attitude." Having the right attitude is associated with qualities like ambition, energy, motivation, and trustworthiness. It may also involve subtler traits like good judgment, a sense of personal responsibility, willingness to defer gratification, persistence in the face of adversity, willingness to take risks, getting along with others, assertiveness, independence, emotional control, and the like. Conversely, a lack of proper attitudes, as evidenced by laziness, shiftlessness, indolence, lack of self-discipline, unreliability, disruptiveness, and so on, is associated with the failure to achieve.

It would seem that these represent two sides of the same coin. However, which side is emphasized makes a big difference in estimating the effects of attitudes and values on life outcomes. Most of the research linking attitudes with mobility has focused not so much on how the "right" attitudes help one get ahead, but on how the "wrong" attitudes keep one from getting ahead. This implies that, in effect, one could have the "right" attitudes but not get ahead anyway. Having the "wrong" attitudes, however, would prevent one from getting ahead, and may even be responsible for one's falling further behind.

One of the early attempts to link attitudes to prospects for attainment is the "culture-of-poverty" theory. This theory was developed initially in the 1960s by anthropologist Oscar Lewis (1959, 1966), who conducted ethnographic studies of Mexican families living in poverty. This general perspective was later applied mainly to African Americans in the United States (Banfield 1970). For proponents of culture-of-poverty theory, the cause of poverty in these settings is not rooted in inherent individual biological deficiencies but in the "culture" of the poor. The "subculture" of poverty in the groups Lewis studied was said to be fatalistic, hedonistic, and impulsive. There was a high incidence of early initiation into sexual activity, consensual unions, and familial disruption. Lewis interpreted this subculture of poverty as

pathological and self-perpetuating. Poor people hang around with other poor people, as these values are reinforced in interaction within the group. Children are socialized into antiwork, antischool, antimarriage, and antiauthority values that are passed on from one generation to the next in what becomes a "vicious cycle of poverty."

One of the central issues in the culture-of-poverty debate is whether poverty creates deviant attitudes or whether deviant attitudes create poverty. For Lewis, it is both. Lack of opportunity creates conditions that favor the development of these values, which—while adaptive to a life of poverty—are maladaptive to prospects for upward mobility. Lewis argued that the poor become so ingrained with a lifestyle of poverty that they reject opportunities to move ahead even when opportunities to do so become available. To this extent, poverty is a freely chosen lifestyle. However, the "blame" is not on individuals but on the group to which individuals belong, and the group itself is seen as resistant to change.

Culture-of-poverty theory has been sharply criticized on several grounds. It rests on the twin assumptions that 1) the poor have attitudes or values different from the nonpoor; and 2) these attitudes or values are responsible for the condition of poverty itself. Critics (Coward, Feagin, and Williams 1974; Della Fave 1974; Gould 1999; Rodman 1963; Valentine 1968; Ryan 1971; Greenbaum 2015) have attacked both of these key assumptions. According to critics of the theory, the poor do not have values significantly different from those of the nonpoor. Rather, the poor, like everyone else, adjust their perceptions of reality to accommodate the reality of their situation, resulting in what Hyman Rodman refers to as "the lower-class value stretch." It is one thing, for instance, to say that the poor have a "present-time orientation" because they are hedonistic thrill seekers who live for the moment. However, it is another thing altogether to say that, regardless of one's personal value system, one is forced to focus on the present if one is not sure where one's next meal might come from. The middle and upper classes have the luxury of being able to plan ahead and defer gratification (for instance, going to college instead of accepting a low-paid service job) precisely because their present is secure. Similarly, the poor may have more modest ambitions than the wealthy not because they are unmotivated, but because they make a realistic assessment of limited life chances. In this formulation, exhibited behaviors and perceptions associated with a "culture of poverty" reflect the *effects* of poverty, not the causes.

The idea of a situational view of poverty is consistent with psychologist Abraham Maslow's well-known "hierarchy-of-needs" theory. According to Maslow (1970), humans have a hierarchical order of needs that begins at the fundamental levels of food, clothing, and shelter and advances to "higher-order" needs for independence and "self-actualization." Maslow points out that one cannot attend to higher-order needs if the lower-order needs are not satisfied. In other words, poverty keeps people stuck at lower-order needs, regardless of their desire for higher-order fulfillment.

In addition to a presumption of a "culture of poverty," some commentators have suggested at the other end of the continuum that there is something akin to a "culture of wealth" (Samuel 2009). Two prominent examples of this line of research

include Thomas Stanley's *The Millionaire Mind* (2000) and Jim Taylor, Doug Harrison, and Stephen Kraus's *The New Elite: Inside the Minds of the Truly Wealthy* (2009). In both cases, the authors survey wealthy individuals to assess their attitudes and values, suggesting there is a "mind-set" of wealth, presumed to include such traits as "working harder than most people" and "being honest with people." In both of these studies, however, there are no control groups; that is, there is no statistical comparison between the wealthy and the non-wealthy, so we don't know how unique the mind-set of the so-called self-made millionaire respondents really is, or if these attitudes are more prominent among the wealthy than anyone else. In addition, the surveys in both studies were conducted among people who were already wealthy, so we don't know if these attitudes were responsible for the acquisition of wealth, or whether wealthy people retrospectively simply attributed their success to attitudes their culture tells them are its source.

Along similar lines, Charles Murray, coauthor of *The Bell Curve*, published a subsequent book, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010* (2012). Consciously staying away from the controversial claims of innate racial differences in average intelligence alleged in *The Bell Curve*, Murray in this newer book depicts a growing gap between a "new upper class" and a "new lower class" among white Americans. He suggests that the growing economic inequality between these groups can be accounted for by a combination of differences in intellectual capacity and "virtues." The new upper class is part of the "cognitive elite" previously identified in *The Bell Curve* who are increasingly being sorted out by "the college sorting machine." With an increasing "market value for brain," the less capable and less competent lower class falls behind both in terms of first academic and then economic achievement. Murray asserts that these patterns are reinforced by acute differences in culture between the two groups. Both groups, he argues, are declining in the "founding virtues" that made America great and constitute the basis for "American exceptionalism," but the decline is much faster for the new lower class than for the new upper class.

Similar to other flattering portrayals of the wealthy discussed above, Murray identifies four "founding virtues" that he claims are in greater preponderance among the new upper class: industriousness, honesty, marriage, and religiosity. What is again conflated, however, is cause and effect. Are these "virtues" a cause or an effect of wealth? For instance, Murray measures "industriousness" by such indicators as hours worked, rates of employment, and rates of disability, which can obviously be a consequence of economic circumstance rather than a cause of it. Likewise, Murray measures "honesty" by rates of arrests and incarceration, which are widely known to be higher for the poor than the rich—not because the rich are more "honest," but because the types of criminality engaged in by the lower class are much more likely to result in arrest and incarceration than the types of criminality engaged in by the upper class (Reiman 2013). Likewise, marriage rates are higher for the wealthy than for the poor—not because the poor do not value marriage, but because economic deprivations make the prospects of finding suitable marriage partners slimmer for the poor than the affluent (Wilson 2012). On religiosity, Murray finds more con-

vergence between the new upper class and the new lower class on indicators such as belief in God and attendance at religious services, as well as toward greater degrees of secularization and less religiosity, but, again, those trends are more pronounced for the new lower class than the new upper class.

All of these portrayals of what Murray describes as "the new elite" have in common an ideology of economic success that historian Richard Huber (1971) refers to as the "mind-power ethic." According to this ethic, success is a case of mind over matter. Presumably, success can be acquired through sheer willpower. The mind-power ethic is a major theme running throughout American success self-help books of the twentieth century (Dunkleman 2000). Fueled by a tradition of Protestant individualism, which was later secularized, and reflected in an American fascination with psychology, the mind-power ethic peaked with the publication of Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952) and his success formula of "prayerize, picturize, and actualize." This ethic speaks especially to the notion that determination and persistence in the face of whatever obstacles may exist are the true secret of success. In this formulation, individuals are not responsible for where they start out in life, but they are responsible for where they end up. In other words, according to these formulations, wealth or poverty is ultimately a matter of "attitude" broadly defined.

Beyond the culture-of-poverty theories and, more recently, culture-of-wealth theories, there has been surprisingly little systematic research into the effects of attitudes and behavioral traits on who gets ahead in America. The results of what research has been done are mixed at best (see Farkas 2003 for a systematic review). The lack of research findings in this area is at least partly due to the difficulty in clearly separating out the effects of all the possible "causes" of who gets ahead (and conversely, who falls behind). In this regard, "panel studies" that survey the same individuals in "waves," beginning at young ages while still in school, and then subsequent waves as they move into the labor force, are superior to both "cross-sectional" surveys in which respondents are interviewed at a given time, and surveys in which only poor or only wealthy people are interviewed.

In one of the few studies using panel studies, for instance, Matthew Hall and George Farkas (2011) find that expressed degrees of self-reported self-esteem, locus of control (belief that one has control one's own fate), and higher educational aspirations among adolescents are associated with subsequent higher career wages as adults. However, the wage return in terms of subsequent wages associated with these characteristics varies by race and gender, with white males having the highest return, and nonwhites and women having the lowest—or even, in some cases (e.g., black women), negative—returns. This result strongly suggests that discrimination may blunt or negate the potential effects of attitudes on career wages.

Other research suggests that what might matter for getting ahead is not a particular attitude or set of attitudes so much as a *match* of attitudes or orientations in particular arenas of endeavor (Jencks et al. 1979). For instance, the kind of "mind-set" that might make for a successful accountant might be very different than the kind of "mind-set" that might make for a successful artist.

It is not clear, then, what specific attitudes are individually determinative of economic success as opposed to being merely associated with it or a consequence of it. It is also not clear which particular attitudes are associated with success in particular tasks, occupations, or professions. Furthermore, it is not clear how to measure these attitudes or to distinguish their effects from other related factors, such as family background. Much of what passes as the right attitude, for instance, is likely to be at least partially the result of differential access to preferred forms of cultural capital (see chapter 4). Such intangibles as comportment, demeanor, and presentation of self to others (interpreted by others as "attitude") may be more a reflection of upbringing than uniquely personal or individual attitudes. These traits may be seen as desirable by people in positions of authority even if such traits may not actually affect job performance.

## WORKING HARD OR HARDLY WORKING

In the formula for getting ahead, hard work typically ranks by far as the most prominent factor for most Americans (McCall 2013, 151). It is difficult to disentangle the effects of attitudes such as motivation, industriousness, ambition, and so on from actual hard work. Attitudes alone, however, are likely not as important as actual behavior.

Americans nod their heads knowingly and approvingly whenever the importance of hard work is mentioned in association with the likelihood of success. But what does working hard really mean? Does it refer to the number of hours worked? Does it refer to the level of exertion expended in the conduct of work? How are these factors related to concrete measures of economic success—that is, wealth and income?

As Barbara Ehrenreich (2001) discovered when she spent a year doing menial jobs in America in a participant observation study, often the hardest-working Americans are those who get paid the least. It is the waitress with sore feet at the end of the day after several miles of trudging between the kitchen and dining area, taking orders, pouring drinks, and carrying dishes and heavy trays of food. It is the lowest-paid member of the construction crew with aching muscles and a sore back after a day of toting heavy loads of construction materials on the work site. It is the secretary with carpal tunnel syndrome who works her fingers to the bone typing departmental reports. It is the janitor who moonlights as a housepainter and works over sixty hours a week because neither job pays enough to make ends meet. Individuals such as these represent the backbone of the American *working* class. Additional "hard" work of this kind, however, is unlikely to result in any significant wealth or upward social mobility.

Conversely, those with high-paying jobs may not be working any "harder" than those with less-well-paying jobs in the same employing organizations. In most jobs in America, compensation is more directly related to levels of responsibility and authority than it is to number of hours worked or intensity of effort exerted (Kalleberg 2011). Further, those who have the most may actually expend the least amount of effort. The really big money in America, as shown in the following chapter, does not

come from working for a living at all, but from ownership of property—especially the kind of property that produces additional wealth, such as stocks and bonds, real estate, business assets, and so on. Indeed, those who live off *unearned* income from investments may not need to work at all. If one is wealthy enough, it is possible to hire small armies of accountants, lawyers, and brokers to manage one's holdings and still be among the wealthiest of all Americans.

Still, one wonders how one would actually know how hard people work. If we consider the obvious measure of hours worked, the data show that Americans already work more than workers in most other developed countries. Americans, for instance, on average work 19 percent more hours a year than Europeans, or about 265 hours more a year (Bick et al. 2016). Americans also retire later and have fewer and shorter vacations than Europeans. In addition, Americans are increasingly subject to employer "wage theft" through "off the clock" overtime and other unpaid work (Cooper and Kroeger 2017), aided by the long reach of employers into the private sphere of their workers through new digital technologies such as cell phones.

Moreover, working "hard" in terms of working long hours can have dire detrimental consequences for workers, employing organizations, and the general public (Carter 2015; Derickson 2013; Schor 2008). Data show, for instance, that alertness, effectiveness, and productivity can decline with excessive hours worked, which is why, for instance, there are safety restrictions on how many consecutive hours or total hours per day that pilots, medical doctors, truck drivers, and others can work (Derickson 2013).

But do more hours worked translate into greater occupational or economic success? In *Outliers: The Story of Success*, Malcolm Gladwell (2008) refers to the "10,000 hour rule," citing studies that show that it takes a minimum of about ten thousand hours of practice to develop world-class expertise in most areas of human endeavor. Gladwell was making the point that talent alone does not spontaneously produce results. That is, any capacity that individuals have must not only be initially identified and provided an opportunity to flourish, but also honed through hours of application and practice to reach elite levels. That does not mean, however, that ten thousand hours of application in doing different things produces equivalent results. Most people spend considerably more than ten thousand hours in the work that they do in a lifetime, but they are not all equally successful. Spending ten thousand hours working as a waitress or mastering the yo-yo is unlikely to have as much economic benefit, for instance, as ten thousand hours working as a neurosurgeon.

Since there is a biological limit on how much any one person can "work," and most Americans appear in general to work hard, there is simply not enough variation in hours worked or intensity of effort to account for the substantial and growing extent of income and wealth inequality. Those at the very top of the system, for instance, do not and cannot possibly work billions of times more than average Americans. Yet as previously noted, when respondents are asked to state the reason(s) for their success, they almost always answer, "hard work," or some variant. People claim that they deserve their success because they work hard. Yet deservedness is not equivalent to hard work; and, as has been repeatedly shown, many people who work hard are

not especially economically successful, and many who are economically "successful" do not work especially hard (or at all). Clearly, hard work alone is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for receiving the most compensation for whatever it is that people do. Hard work matters, but in terms of compensation, what people do matters far more than how "hard" they do it. When people cite hard work as a factor in getting ahead, they really mean hard work in combination with other factors, especially opportunity and acquired skills, both of which are more related to social background than individual capacities.

## MORAL CHARACTER

In addition to persistence in the face of adversity, another frequent theme in the American cultural folklore of meritocracy is that being made of the right stuff includes moral character and integrity. Moral fiber and character have been a constant theme in American self-help success books (Dunkleman 2000; Starker 2002; McGee 2005). The early advice manuals, in particular, echoed the twin pillars of the Protestant ethic: diligence and asceticism. In addition to working hard, the "truly" successful person had honor and dignity. People should pursue wealth not for the purposes of self-gratification or personal indulgence but for the glory of God and to help others. In this formulation, success is taken as evidence of God's grace; successful people saw themselves as moral people. There was always some tension, however, between materialism and idealism in the pursuit of wealth.

While honesty and integrity are certainly worthy goals in their own right, in the final analysis, do they help or hinder in the making of money? There is little direct evidence suggesting that these virtues help or hinder the prospects for social mobility. On the one hand, we have numerous testimonials of wealthy individuals who claim such virtues. One of the few studies on the effect of integrity on success comes from *Who Gets Ahead* (Jencks et al. 1979, 154). Among the many noncognitive factors that they examined was integrity, as measured by teachers' accounts of students' personalities longitudinally related to later mobility. They reported that, controlling for other factors, integrity produced a small *inverse* but statistically significant effect. That is, everything else being equal, integrity was associated with less upward mobility.

The overall effect of integrity is likely to suppress rather than enhance upward mobility. This is because not cheating, not stealing, and not choosing to get ahead at the expense of others restricts prospects for social mobility and the accumulation of wealth. Wealth can be achieved by honest or dishonest means. The logic of this argument is that those who limit themselves to strictly honest means to get ahead have fewer opportunities to do so than those who do not limit themselves in this way. Direct evidence for the wealth-enhancing character of ruthless and unethical behavior comes from the history of industrial capitalism. Many of the wealthy industrialists of the last century earned notorious reputations as "robber barons" for their relentless and cutthroat pursuit of wealth and power. The indirect evidence for the

wealth-enhancing character of unethical behavior comes from the substantial extent of white-collar crime in America (Balleisen 2017; Barak 2017; Rosoff et al. 2013). Assuming that the amount of exposed white-collar crime represents only the tip of the iceberg of unscrupulousness, it is reasonable to conclude that making money in America is often accomplished through less than impeccably honest or ethical means.

It is difficult to estimate the full extent of white-collar crime in America. This type of crime has become more sophisticated and includes a variety of financial crimes, such as securities and commodities fraud, health-care fraud, financial institution fraud, embezzlement and employee theft, identity theft and Internet fraud, mortgage fraud, insurance fraud, check fraud, marketing fraud, and money laundering. Because much of this type of crime is hidden in financial complexities and goes undetected, it is difficult to determine its exact cost. Nevertheless, the total cost to society of these kinds of financial crime is staggering. The total annual financial cost of this type of crime in the United States has been estimated to be well over $1 trillion annually, which does not include intangible loss, such as the psychological impact of victimization (Cohen 2016).

It is more difficult to detect white-collar crime since enforcement efforts of the criminal-justice system are directed toward crimes committed by the poor rather than the rich (Messner and Rosenfeld 2007; Reiman and Leighton 2017; Rosoff et al. 2013), and people are often unaware that they have been victimized. When white-collar crimes are exposed, the sums procured in their commission are often shocking—often totaling in the millions, and sometimes even in the billions, of dollars. The Ponzi scheme stock fraud perpetrated by Bernard Madoff totaling $65 billion is one particularly glaring example. Other examples include the notorious and illegal stock manipulations of Ivan Boesky (deal stocks), Michael Milken (junk bonds), and Charles Keating (the savings-and-loan scandal); and corporate wrongdoing, including ethics scandals at Enron, WorldCom, Arthur Andersen, Volkswagen, and many others.

Suffice it to say, at least some of the wealth of financiers, executives, and professionals has been gained through often illegal or less than ethical means. This is in addition to untold wealth realized from more-conventional organized crime, including drug trafficking, prostitution and sex trafficking, bribery, counterfeiting, racketeering, extortion, gambling, and the like. In an ideal world, the virtuous succeed and the corrupt fail. But in the real world, too often this is not the case.

## A NOTE ON HUMAN CAPITAL

Human capital factors are often included in the "merit" formula for success. Human capital refers to whatever *acquired* skills, knowledge, or experience workers possess that they can exchange for income in open markets. Clearly, having acquired capacity is not the same as being inherently made of the right stuff, because opportunities to acquire skills and experience are independent of the inherent capacity to do

things. In human capital theory, wage laborers can "invest" in themselves through the accumulation of education and training, thus increasing their skills and presumably their productive capacities. But, as with investments in other forms of economic capital, investments in human capital require resources and entail an element of risk. Capacities to do things represent the "supply" side of the labor market; the specific capacities employers actually need represent the "demand" side of the labor market. The biggest returns on human capital investments are those in which the capacities acquired are both scarce and in high demand. It is possible, however, to invest in the "wrong" capacities. This can occur, for instance, when individuals are trained for jobs that become obsolete, sometimes even before the training period is complete. Or too many individuals may invest in acquiring the same skills, glutting the market and reducing return on investment. In both cases, one can be very meritorious but also very unemployed. Although we explore the supply effects of human capital in greater detail in chapter 5 and the demand side of the equation in greater detail in chapter 7, the point here is that this type of merit alone does not guarantee success.

## THE MYTH OF THE MOST QUALIFIED

Defenders of meritocracy (and critics of affirmative action) often proclaim that the issue of who should get what is simple and straightforward: just hire the *most* qualified person for the job. However, even ignoring the fact that the big money in America comes from economic investments and not from jobs for which people are hired, this is not as simple and straightforward as many presume.

If merit were the sole cause of achievement, for instance, one would wonder why the vast amount of meritocratic talent is found in white males, who clearly dominate leadership positions in key institutions in society. Even setting discrimination and differential access to opportunity aside, how, in fact, would one recognize the *most* qualified applicant for every position in America?

Consider a somewhat extended example from my own profession. In addition to my own experience in the academic labor market, I have been on scores of faculty hiring committees in my own department, and, in my former roles as an associate dean and dean, I have also conducted scores of interviews of job candidates for other departments, representing over thirty academic disciplines.

I need to make two caveats. Hiring in academia is somewhat unusual compared to other sectors of the economy in that it is, for the most part, highly collegial; that is, the decision to hire is a collective one, typically made jointly by the existing members of the faculty in a given department, subject to approval at higher levels. This joint decision-making process reduces the chance of capriciously hiring any one person based on the singular decision of the "boss." Another unique quality of academic hiring is that faculty positions involve national searches; that is, job openings are advertised nationally (and internationally), casting the widest possible net. All of this is intended to increase the chances of hiring the best person for the job.

Although the intent is to hire the best person for the job, as anyone who has ever participated in the process knows, the problem comes in figuring out what is "best" and who that "best" person might be. The first qualification for the job is to have a PhD from an academically accredited institution in the discipline in which the faculty member will teach and do research. So far, so good. For a typical faculty position in our department, we might receive around one hundred applications. Among these, almost all of the applicants have a PhD in the appropriate field or are in the process of completing one. That is, only a handful of the applicants can quickly be eliminated as unqualified on that basis. It should be noted, however, that automatically eliminating those without the PhD might itself be a "merit mistake," since every academic field of study has at least a few cases of famous scholars who were giants in their fields of study but who never earned a PhD.[3]

After screening candidates for meeting the minimum paper qualifications, the hiring committee then carefully reviews the remaining applications, which consist of a letter of application, an academic résumé, called a "vita," and three letters of recommendation. Together, these materials represent a "paper presentation of self" of the applicant to the committee. After serving on a few of these committees, one realizes very quickly that holding experience, ability, and qualifications constant, some individuals are simply better than others at presenting their case on paper. Presentation of a case on paper and actual ability to do a job are two different things. More on this later. Based on these paper presentations of self, the hiring committee will develop a short list of maybe ten individuals for closer review. The short list is generated based on all reasonable indicators of merit: teaching record and experience, research record and potential, and "goodness of fit" with the needs of the department. With respect to the latter quality, it should be noted that we often have applicants who are truly outstanding but do not fit the advertised position; that is, they may appear to be the *most* talented or meritorious people in their respective pools overall, but they do not have areas of specialization for the position as advertised (e.g., an applicant is a great demographer, but we are really looking for a gerontologist). Further, as with most academic hires at most universities, we are most often looking to fill entry-level positions at the assistant professor level. This means that we will not usually consider the candidate who is literally the "best" in our pool if such a candidate is, for instance, a senior full professor with a proven track record, because such a candidate would be too expensive for the institution to hire. In this sense, we are not looking for the *most* meritorious professor we can find; we are looking for the most meritorious *new* assistant professor we can afford, in a specific area we need to fill.

In developing the short list, there are typically differences of opinion among members of the search committee. We try to reach a consensus, but perfect agreement rarely occurs. Majority sentiment prevails, but lack of consensus is itself an indicator of the difficulty of determining what "best" represents. We make a collective best guess as to who the ten best applicants in the pool might be. In developing an initial short list, the committee may well have overlooked the candidate who was, in fact, the best in the pool in terms of how that person ultimately could have done the

job, but presented her- or himself poorly on paper. We will never know. One could argue that how one presents oneself on paper is an indicator of merit. However, we also know that many candidates, especially more recently minted PhDs, are better coached than others, and paper presentation of self is often more a reflection of the good advice of senior mentors than of candidate skills. We now have ten or so short-listed candidates but still only one position. The next step is to select three from among the top ten for on-campus interviews.

Perhaps we would do a better job of screening for raw talent if we interviewed more candidates. But resources are limited—both the money kind that is required to pay for on-campus interviews, and the time kind related to faculty who must also do all the other things faculty are supposed to do. Often, the short-listed candidates seem indistinguishable in terms of merit. All appear excellent, and looking for distinctions can become an exercise in splitting hairs. Frequently, there is another twist to the hiring drama. A dilemma that frequently unfolds is related to the amount of experience a candidate has. Since we most often hire at the assistant professor level, this means that most of the applicants are new or relatively new PhDs. Relatively new PhDs present a comparison problem. If candidates are already assistant professors at other institutions, they have more teaching experience and typically more extensive research track records than brand-new PhDs—but that does not necessarily make them "better" or more "meritorious." It is strictly a judgment call for a committee to decide whether potential exceeds track record in comparing new and almost-new PhDs—a source of more than one fierce debate in hiring committees I have been on.

Another potential hiring dilemma concerns "internal" candidates—candidates who are already associated with, or employed by, the university in some other capacity, such as part-time instructor or temporary lecturer. In some cases, the internal candidate may be applying for a particular permanent position that they currently occupy on a temporary basis. If strictly merit criteria apply, then internal candidates should be evaluated in the same manner as all other candidates without any preferential consideration. In practice, however, internal candidates often have a distinct advantage apart from strictly merit considerations. They are known by the hiring agents, and often friendships and emotional ties have already been formed. The internal candidate may be "qualified" and "doing a good job" but not necessarily the *most* qualified among all candidates who have applied, some of whom may be not just "good" but "outstanding." Social accountability also comes into play here. It is much easier to send a stranger a letter of rejection than to tell someone in the office next door that he or she did not get the job (and is thus out of his or her current job). The emotional burden of all this may weigh heavily on the decision-making process. To the extent that this is the case, strictly merit considerations are compromised.

It is an "open secret" in higher education that in some cases internal faculty candidates are essentially "wired in." That is, the application process is only a formality needed to satisfy human resource department requirements for public advertisement. One way institutions can "game" the system in this way is to write a job ad for a position that matches the particular internal candidate that the institution has in mind to

such a degree of specificity of background, skills, experience, and specialties that only that particular internal candidate would likely match the advertised position. Qualified external candidates may apply in good faith, not realizing that a decision has essentially already been rendered. In other cases, competitive searches are suspended and candidates are merely presented to departments for up or down consideration.

The issue of "trailing partners" presents another potential hiring dilemma. With the postponement of age of first marriage, increasing higher educational attainment for women, and the growing proportion of women in the professoriate, there is an increasing prospect of academic couples simultaneously seeking positions at the same university. The problem is compounded if the couples are in the same discipline and have the same areas of specialty. Typically, only one position is available in an academic department at any one time. It is also unlikely that each partner will be identically "meritorious" in all respects, and that both will emerge from a strictly meritocratic review process as more meritorious than all other applicants combined. At the same time, universities are increasingly sensitive to this very human dilemma and are anxious to develop "family-friendly hiring practices."

One way some universities have responded to this potential dilemma is to allow couples to "share" a single position. Another way is for universities to try to find or create a suitable position for a partner. In short, there may be very human, legitimate, and practical reasons to make accommodations under these circumstances (for instance, you lose the most qualified candidate you want unless you can find suitable employment for a partner who may also be as qualified but for whom you have no existing position). At the same time, it should be recognized that such accommodations represent hiring decisions on criteria other than strictly merit considerations alone.

Finally, in an ironic twist, some candidates may be less aggressively pursued if they are viewed as "overly qualified." Here, the hiring agents may predict that a particularly outstanding applicant will likely receive more lucrative or attractive job offers elsewhere. The hiring committee might anticipate that it could not possibly match offers from other high-profile institutions likely interested in such candidates, and thus deem pursuing them to be a waste of time and other resources, which would risk losing more viable candidates for the position under consideration. Sometimes this emerges as a sentiment (or post hoc justification) in which the hiring officials speculate that the "overly qualified" person would end up "not being happy here."

Still other potentially nonmerit factors may come into play in the hiring drama. Do we know any of the people who are writing letters of recommendation for the candidates? Here the social network among the professoriate comes into play. New PhDs are typically not well known, but their professors and references might be. We may give more weight to candidates who are students of professors we know personally or who have "big names" writing for them. Everything else being equal or indistinguishable, the familiarity or prestige of the references might become a factor, as might the prestige of the institution where the candidates were trained. Here, some candidates may benefit from a "halo" effect of the glow of the institution from

which they received their training, even though this in itself does not necessarily measure the merit of an individual.

Some of the most heated debates in hiring, however, have more to do with the faculty on the hiring committees than the candidates themselves. Hiring can become a political battle over which faction or coalition will prevail. Factions might develop over methodological, theoretical, or substantive differences within the hiring committee. Everything else being equal (and frequently even when it is not), faculty members will try to hire someone like themselves. Individual faculty may also be interested in promoting the power of their own faction or in hiring someone who might be a personal asset to them, even if that person is not the most "meritorious" in the pool.

When the dust of these debates clears, normally three candidates are brought to campus for an extended interview, usually lasting two or three full days each. During this time, candidates have one-on-one interviews with faculty and administrators and typically teach a class and give a research presentation. There are also a number of opportunities for informal interaction at dinners, receptions, and community tours. I have been amazed over the years at how frequently the top three on paper do not end up being ranked in the same order after on-campus interviews, reflecting the differences alluded to above between real and paper presentations of self. Another intangible screening factor is how well the candidates are "liked." Here, social skills may be more important than technical expertise or paper qualifications. How people present themselves in a job interview, however, may not predict how well they will actually perform on the job. Everything else being equal (and sometimes not so equal), at this final stage of the hiring process the candidate who "gets along" best with the most influential members of the committee will typically triumph over others.

In the end, a job offer is made to one person. Although the hiring committee, the department, and administrators may congratulate themselves for having selected the "best" person in the pool, the reality is that there is, in fact, no way to determine that with certainty. Do we routinely hire highly qualified candidates who are very meritorious? Absolutely. Have we always hired the *most* meritorious person for the job? Probably not, but we will never know for sure. The point of this extended example is to show that even within the professoriate, a profession in which academic qualifications and individual merit are highly extolled, there is no assurance that the "best" ultimately prevails. The hiring process is likely to be even more slippery and uncertain for real estate agents, store clerks, janitors, and a host of other jobs for which the merit criteria may be less agreed upon and more difficult to measure, and for which the screening processes are far less rigorous. When it comes to hiring the "best" or "most qualified," there are many slips betwixt the cup and the lip.

## SUMMARY

This chapter has explored the meritocratic formula for getting ahead in America: being talented, having the right attitude, working hard, and having high moral stan-

dards. With the exception of high moral standards, all of them have some bearing on getting ahead in America. That is, individual capacity, certain attitudes, and hard work all probably do help people get ahead. High moral standards, however, may actually have the opposite effect by reducing the options available to get ahead. While being made of the "right stuff" in general helps people to get ahead, the reality is that these qualities exist in far greater quantity in the general population than is ever actually realized. Moreover, many individual traits often have social origins, and the effects of these traits are often much less than is presumed. By themselves, these traits are not typically enough to make the difference. It is not innate capacity alone, or hard work alone, or the proper frame of mind alone, that makes a difference. Rather, it is the *combination* of opportunity and these other factors that makes a difference.

The presumption that people know merit when they see it is also called into question. How do we really know who is the most meritorious? Recall that it is a cardinal principle in meritocracy that the "most" qualified or "best" person should be hired for the job. An example from the process for hiring professors illustrates that it is often difficult or impossible to know who the best is.

Subsequent chapters examine various nonmerit factors that affect where people end up in the system, beginning with the effects of inheritance or where one starts out in the first place.

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